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ON PAGE 1

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Cutbacks by C.I.A.'s New Director Creating Turmoil Within Agency

By DAVID BINDER

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 9.—The Central Intelligence Agency, which is just beginning to recover from the trauma of having some of its more provocative covert actions disclosed, is now troubled internally over the decision of its new head, Admiral Stansfield Turner, to dismiss most of the top officers in the branch that carried out covert operations.

At issue is not only his tough approach to the clandestine services, but also his style as the head of the 16,000-member agency.

Bulletin boards at the agency's headquarters have sprouted with anti-Turner messages and veteran officers of the agency have taken their troubles to newsmen in an unprecedented fashion.

The agency's turmoil is a problem that the blunt-spoken Director of Central Intelligence partly acknowledged when it was posed to him in a 75-minute interview this week, although he strongly defended his record since he was sworn in last March 9. "I probably made some mistakes in the way I handle things here," he said. "But I have handled them as straightforward management decisions."

Harsh Accusations Made

Starting Oct. 31, 212 members of the covert staff were notified that they were being considered for termination of services. According to Admiral Turner, another 225 members "at the maximum" will receive similar notice in the next year.

But in talks with 11 current and three former C.I.A. officers, an impression emerged that the "Halloween massacre," as critics have now dubbed the cuts, was only one of a series of actions by Admiral Turner that perturb them.

Among the charges they make against him are that he is "fragmenting" the agency, that he has "demoralized" most of its middle-grade and senior officers, that he has been largely inaccessible, that he has "reduced C.I.A.'s clout in interagency dealings," that he has treated his wards "with suspicion bordering on hostility," and that he is inept.

In keeping with his pledge of "more openness," Admiral Turner not only agreed to be interviewed but also designated four officers at various levels to talk candidly with a reporter about him and about their view of life in agency. Those reviews were mixed.

A single officer praised the Admiral's actions. He identified himself as Jack Finarelli, a holder of 1970 doctorate in chemistry who is now engaged in analyzing problems of future technologies.

He said he gave Admiral Turner "high marks" for taking seriously his role as head of the American intelligence community and for "biting the bullet" in his decision to cut back the covert operations staff.

Several current and former C.I.A. officers also acknowledged that Admiral Turner's stewardship coincided with changed perceptions of the nation's role in the world. As one former official expressed it, the need for an intelligence service is greatly reduced if the country's main concern is with human rights.

This officer and others agreed that Admiral Turner's directorship represented a major, qualitative transformation in intelligence policy, part of a reorganization that President Carter announced before he appointed the admiral to head the agency.

Criticism of Staff Cuts

Yet Mr. Finarelli, even while defending Admiral Turner, also said that the reductions in the operations directorate had been "done terribly, with a meat ax" and that "there appears to be unease" at the agency's headquarters.

The intention to make the reductions was officially announced to the agency last August in a speech by the Director. He did it with a bold smile, according to an officer who was present.

At that time the number of clandestine services operatives was 4,500, down from 8,500 at the height of the Indochina conflict in 1969 when, according to an operations chief, there were 1,870 covert officers in Vietnam and Laos alone.

Starting eight years ago, this official went on, the operations directorate instituted a program to reduce the staff to 5,000 by 1973 partly through attrition and partly through transfers. That reduction was sharpened by James R. Schlesinger in his brief tenure as head of the agency. The operations directorate lost about 1,400 staff positions in the reduction by Mr. Schlesinger that ended the services of a total of 2,000 C.I.A. employees in early 1973.

The official recounted these nominally secret statistics in disputing Admiral Turner's contention that the clandestine services were "bloated."

The director defended his cuts. "I could have saved myself the pain by letting the situation stagnate," he said, "but I preferred to get new young people, to promote promotions and flowthrough." The cuts were made to strengthen the division—"and I really mean that," he said.

He also defended the manner in which he had ordered the cuts carried out. Denying that it had been a matter of sending out coldly worded, two-sentence notices, he said that division chiefs had been sent to carry the notices personally to each officer selected for dismissal.

Among those chosen to be dismissed were "less than eight" heads of foreign posts, Admiral Turner said. These included station chiefs in London, Vienna, Bonn, Canada and at least three in Latin America. All were top-grade officers and some had been with the agency for three decades.

Several officers who received the dismissal notices had sat on personnel review boards as recently as early October selecting others to be weeded out, only to return to their posts and find themselves receiving notices, too. One of these was the station chief in Ottawa.

One of the strongest criticisms over the cuts is that the director did not consult Charles Briggs, the chief of the evaluation and program design staff in the operations directorate, who is responsible for budgeting and staffing covert services.

The officer who raised this point also said he had been perturbed by Admiral Turner's remark to a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that the cuts had been undertaken because the agency "no longer needs dirty tricks." The officer remarked that previous reductions had cut the number of paramilitary and "black operations" agents to less than 1 percent of the directorate's total.

Turner Aide Also Criticized

A covert operations officer also charged that William W. Wells, the director of clandestine services, would not fight for any of his men. Mr. Wells, along with Admiral Turner, is depicted as a villain in caricatures, graffiti and verse proliferating on headquarters bulletin boards.

Admiral Turner bristled over these accusations. He spoke of "crybabies" last month. He reduced this to "one crybaby" in the interview, and there was a typewritten note in front of him to remind him to say, "1 crybaby."

But he acknowledged an assertion frequently made at the agency that his decision to cut the operations directorate was prompted by a sequence of events that started last April 10 when John Stockwell, a 40-year-old operative, announced his resignation in a public letter to The Washington Post.

The director immediately called upon Mr. Stockwell and other younger officers to substantiate the letter's charges that the directorate was run by an "old," "burned-out" "clique of senior officers."

1 of 2

NEW YORK TIMES

CUTBACK BY CIA'S NEW DIRECTOR

Mr. Stockwell refused, but a number of younger officers complied with the director's request.

Admiral Turner said that he had left the meeting with younger officers "with a fairly strong conviction that we were overstaffed and that this was demotivating people."

This conviction ran counter to the views of Enno Henry Knoche, his deputy director, who so strongly opposed Admiral Turner's approach that he decided to resign last July.

Mr. Knoche was among the current and former officers who have said they felt that Admiral Turner viewed the career service with suspicion bordering on hostility, but he declined to be quoted more specifically.

The Director called this charge "an exaggeration and an untruth."

He also dismissed an accusation that he had been unduly influenced in his attitude toward the operations directorate by Vice President Mondale and Mr. Mondale's former Senate assistant, David Aaron, who directs the staff of the National Security Council.

Agency officers remain unconvinced on this matter. They cite an interview with President Carter published by The New York Times in which he spoke of the "ordeal" of the United States in the last five years created by "Vietnam, C.I.A., Watergate."

One officer, expressing his concern about the comparison, said it proved that the C.I.A. was regarded as a continuing problem by the Administration and by Admiral Turner himself.

Asked about another assertion made in the C.I.A. and the Pentagon that he had been in conflict with Zbigniew Brzezinski, the President's national security adviser, over control of the intelligence flowing into the White House, Admiral Turner said this had been "grossly exaggerated."

A senior Pentagon official assigned to intelligence affairs remarked that under Admiral Turner the agency had lost its former strength in negotiations with other agencies on intelligence matters and had been superseded on many occasions by other Government intelligence services.

Admiral Turner turned this charge aside, pointing out that he had weekly meetings with the President and his top advisers and also attended Cabinet meetings.

As for the accusation that he was inaccessible because of being shielded by what he calls his "Navy mafia" of three

Navy officers who serve as his personal assistants, the Director said, "I am not isolated either—I'd be willing to bet I see more people in the agency than most do."

He said he was "puzzled by the totally erroneous nature" of statements made to the press by some C.I.A. officers about him and his actions and puzzled also that many agency employees "believe the media."

But he insisted, twice, that "basic morale" in the agency was "good."

Has the intelligence product suffered?

Admiral Turner and others in the Administration echoed the view of even a critic who is currently in the agency. "I am terribly pleased with the analyses I am getting here," said the Director.

But a current officer said the problem at the C.I.A. did not involve low morale so much as a cynicism and paranoia that was creeping upward and penetrating the middle and upper ranks.

Admiral Turner said he, too, was aware of "paranoid" tendencies in the agency. But "I'm not worried," he said. "It'll come around."